

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of December 15, 2020

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Julie H. Goodrich, Nathaniel Miller (6:45 p.m.), Charles Morse, and John Stevens. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Laurie Baroffio (Finance Director), Mitch Osiecki (Zoning Administrator), Jon Ignatowski (Economic Development Director), Shannon Palone (Pool Director), Nigel Tibbles, Bob Keeley, and Carolyn Stevens.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. In keeping with Governor Phil Scott's COVID-19 "stay at home" directive, the meeting was held remotely.

- II. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Scheduled):** None.

III. BUDGET WORK SESSION

- a. Planning & Zoning.** Manager Schulz said in the proposed FY 2021/2022 municipal budget, the O&M (operations and maintenance) budget for the Planning & Zoning Department will increase \$1,700 (5.1%) in FY 2021/2022. This is mainly due to a three percent (3%) increase in the hourly wage for the Zoning Administrator and an increase from \$7,540 to \$8,350 in the annual membership dues charged by the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC). Manager Schulz said CVRPC provides many useful services for the municipality, including assistance with applying for various state and federal grants, so this cost is more than justified. There are only slight modifications for other line items in this budget.

Zoning Administrator Mitch Osiecki then provided a quick overview of his activities over the past year. As in other Vermont communities, there has been an increase in the number of zoning permit applications during the COVID-19 pandemic with ninety-two (92) so far in 2020 compared to sixty-two (62) in 2019. Ms. Osiecki suspects many residents, being house-bound, decided to perform some long-delayed home improvements at this time. He also has been working on stronger enforcement of Northfield's zoning regulations, especially with in cases of junk cars sitting on front lawns, domiciles allowed to become dilapidated, unpermitted fences that might not conform to actual parcel boundaries, etc. He also has been contacting businesses with storefront signs that never went through the approval process.

Chair Maxwell asked if the zoning permit fee structure in Northfield was comparable to that in other Central Vermont communities. Mr. Osiecki said we were in good shape overall. The only permit fee that seemed noticeably low was that charged for subdivision applications. Mr. Osiecki said Northfield only charges for the new lot(s) being created whereas other communities also charge for the modification of the original lot. In addition, the total charge for the new lots was \$125 each, which is rather low considering the administrative costs incurred in the process. This includes sending certified letters to abutting property owners, having the hearing notice printed in the newspaper, etc. If the Select Board members are agreeable to adjusting this fee, Mr. Osiecki will research the matter further and come up with amounts comparable to what other Central Vermont communities charge. Other than this, he felt the permit fee structure is pretty reasonable for both the municipality and for residents.

Chair Maxwell asked if there was anything else the Select Board members could do to make Mr. Osiecki's job easier. Mr. Osiecki didn't think there was. He has been dealing with a number of fence disputes recently that can be troublesome but are part of the job. Chair Maxwell asked when the Select Board members should address adjusting zoning permit fees. Manager Schulz felt we should wait a few months so Mr. Osiecki can perform his research. Mr. Osiecki thought that was a good idea as he doesn't expect much zoning activity until next spring. Chair Maxwell then thanked Mr. Osiecki for the update and hopes he will continue his good work in the coming year.

- b. Economic Development.** Manager Schulz said the FY 2021/2022 municipal budget will be the first one with a separate economic development budget. The Economic Development Director (EDD) position was authorized by voters at the March 2020 Town Meeting. The approved article stated that the estimated FY 2020/2021 wages for this position (\$31,464) would be financed by “using \$10,488 from local tax revenue and any balance to be paid by the Economic Development Fund.” Manager Schulz said we are now establishing a set EDD budget for FY 2021/2022 with wages, contract services, and administrative costs. The wage source is based on the original proposal from the Northfield Community Development Network (NCDN), which spearheaded the creation of the EDD position. That proposal had the first year of EDD wages paid one-third from local tax revenues and two-thirds from the Economic Development Fund and that has been the case in the current fiscal year. In the second year, there would be a shift to two-thirds from local tax revenue and one-third from the Economic Development Fund. This is what Manager Schulz is proposing for the FY 2021/2022 budget. In the third year and beyond, the EDD position would be funded solely by local tax revenue. The intent is to avoid further depletion of the Economic Development Fund for a purpose that was not intended when it was first established in FY 2014/2015.

Chair Maxwell asked what was the current balance of the Economic Development Fund. Finance Director Baroffio said \$69,616. The proposed budget would use about \$11,000 of this in FY 2021/2022 to partially fund the EDD position, leaving a balance of about \$58,000. Board member Morse believes having the EDD position in place will provide long-term benefits to Northfield. Board member Stevens thinks using a split of tax revenues and economic development funds for the first two years of this position is appropriate. He also believes Northfield’s first EDD, Jon Ignatowski, has been doing a great job in his first few months so the Select Board should continue to support funding this position. Board member Goodrich asked if the 2021 Town Warning should have a separate article funding this position (like last year). Manager Schulz didn’t think that was necessary since the Economic Development budget will be a part of the overall municipal budget that Northfield voters will approve on Town Meeting Day.

Mr. Ignatowski provided the Select Board members with a detailed departmental update and action plan at their regular meeting of November 24, 2020. Therefore, he now wanted to provide a brief recap of what he has been working on since then. He said the update to the current municipal website to make it more attractive and user-friendly should be operational in early 2021. He is also working on a separate website, which he called a “tourist” website, that would promote existing Northfield businesses while trying to attract new ones to the community. This website would extol the positive business situation in Northfield and cite its many benefits to emerging entrepreneurs. Mr. Ignatowski has solicited and received three (3) bids to professionally design the tourist website that range from \$10,000 to \$13,000. If authorized by the Select Board members, he will start work on this by mid-January 2021. He hopes to have the website up and running by May 2021, which should be around the time there might be relaxations of current COVID-19 restrictions as well as appropriate weather for outside dining and other seasonal activities. Chair Maxwell asked if the \$10,000 to \$13,000 for the tourist website was included in the proposed budget. Manager Schulz has not yet determined the best source for this expense. It could be funded by tax revenues, economic development funds, or some combination of the two. Mr. Ignatowski felt this was an appropriate use of economic development funds as it would benefit both existing and potential local businesses.

Mr. Ignatowski also is planning an online public meeting next week that would discuss the \$20,000 placemaking grant Northfield has been awarded by the Vermont Agency of Commence and Community Development (ACCD). The meeting would seek feedback on how these funds should be used and also assemble an action team to assist him with grant implementation. In addition, Mr. Ignatowski has learned there now is an opportunity to apply for a US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development grant. If the supplication is successful, Mr. Ignatowski would like to use the funds to establish a local revolving loan fund to assist local businesses (which he discussed at the 11/24/20 meeting) as well as supplement existing economic development funds. He will provide a full proposal to the Select Board members when they have more time after the current budget sessions have ended.

Mr. Ignatowski also is looking to send a posting to Front Porch Forum in the next few days that will encourage Northfield residents to support local businesses during this holiday season. Board member Morse asked if the posting would focus solely on businesses located on and around the Common. Mr. Ignatowski said that was his starting point but he hopes to expand the appeal to cover the entire community, including the now-online Northfield Farmers Market, before sending the posting. Board member Morse likes the idea that both stores and service industries would be included. He also likes the concept of establishing a revolving loan fund to assist local businesses. Board member Morse thinks the money spent on the tourist website would be a sound investment but would favor using tax funds rather than further depleting the Economic Development Fund. Board member Stevens likes the idea of having a revised municipal website and a new promotional website. He would not oppose using economic development funds for this purpose. Board member Goodrich asked why the two websites couldn't be combined into one. Mr. Ignatowski said the websites really have separate purposes with the municipal website expected to provide official information on local government operations and not be used for commercial purposes. Other Vermont communities also maintain separate websites for official business and for local promotion. Chair Maxwell then thanked Mr. Ignatowski for tonight's presentation and commended him for his good work to date.

- c. **Municipal Pool.** Manager Schulz said the proposed O&M budget for the Municipal Pool will increase \$2,850 (3.3%) in FY 2021/2022 with much of the added expense attributable to slightly higher costs for personnel expenses and utility charges. It was noted the pool did not open in Summer 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pool Director Shannon Palone said the same number of lifeguards as in past years would be hired this year. She also is hoping to bring in additional revenue through new programs, such as water aerobics, private swimming lessons for adults, etc. Chair Maxwell asked how realistic is it to expect the pool will reopen as normal in mid-June 2021. Ms. Palone felt procedures can be put in place for proper distance separation of swimmers, disinfection of common areas, etc. It also could be possible to limit the number of pool users at one time. There also might be positive developments by then with widespread COVID-19 vaccinations, etc.

Manager Schulz then turned to the Municipal Pool Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget. There is a \$46,201 balance in the "Paint/Repair Pool" account with \$7,930 to be added in FY 2021/2022. This complete overhaul is done every ten (10) years with the next one scheduled for FY 2023/2024. There should be sufficient funds in this account by then. In the interim, minor repairs and patching are done whenever needed. There is some work that needs to be done in the near future that should cost about \$2,000. Manager Schulz said the pool has about thirty (30) skimmers installed at the pool and he has been informed by Utility Superintendent Patrick DeMasi that replacement skimmers with the exact dimensions as the current ones can no longer be purchased. Two (2) new skimmers were installed while the pool was closed this past summer and they had to be adapted to fit. Superintendent DeMasi said the long-term solution may require modifying the pool's concrete sides so new skimmers will fit properly. The "Building/Facility Improvements" CIP budget has a \$1,451 deficit so \$1,460 will be added in the FY 2021/2022 budget to cancel this shortfall.

Manager Schulz said the Municipal Pool Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget includes accounts for the scheduled replacements of the pool filter, pool vacuum, diving boards, lifeguard chairs, and diving board bases. The filter replacement is scheduled for FY 2024/2025 and the current balance in this account is \$53,653. \$7,500 will be added to this account in future fiscal years so there should be sufficient funding when the filter replacement is performed. The estimated cost is between \$80,000 and \$100,000. The pool vacuum account has a \$6,026 balance and the replacement vacuum should cost about \$5,000. There remains some discussion regarding if and when the vacuum should be replaced. Ms. Palone would like to replace the current vacuum with a different model that could be operated by one person over a four (4) hour period. The current vacuum also requires four (4) hours of operation but has to be worked by three (3) people. The different brand would cost a little less (\$3,000) but might not have the same ten (10) year lifespan as the current one. Ms. Palone believes the savings in personnel costs should be an important factor in the purchase decision. Manager Schulz said there are sufficient funds on hand no matter whichever decision is made.

Ms. Palone said the current diving boards don't need immediate replacement but the bases supporting them are in poor condition. They probably won't last more than two (2) years so funds will need to be set aside for their replacement. In addition, two (2) lifeguard chairs need to be replaced. There is \$3,400 in this CIP account and Ms. Palone will search for suitable replacements before the pool opens.

In regards to the pool not opening this past summer, Board member Goodrich said it had been a difficult decision for the Select Board at the time and not taken lightly. Ms. Palone said it probably was the correct decision even though it was very disappointing to local youth. She added there were some issues with the pool bathhouse and asked if Superintendent DeMasi was aware of this. Manager Schulz said he was and he didn't think it would take too much time or expense to repair. Board member Stevens looked at the proposed sewer utility charge (\$3,000) and hoped it could be reduced. Since pool water is chlorinated and cannot be released directly into the nearby Dog River, Board member Stevens asked if drained pool water could be treated (like stormwater) in an on-site collection facility and then released into the river. Manager Schulz will look into this possibility. Chair Maxwell then thanked Ms. Palone for attending tonight's meeting and for her valuable input.

- d. Debt Retirement/Capital.** Since there still is time available tonight, Manager Schulz would like a brief discussion of municipal debt. He noted the amount of municipal debt payments will drop from \$276,860 to \$221,250 in the next fiscal year, which is a 20.1% decrease. There is a new debt payment in FY 2021/2022 (Fire Tanker Truck) but the overall decrease is due to old borrowing coming off the books, which includes a FY 2010/2011 RSMS loan. Manager Schulz feels the municipality is moving into the right direction in reducing its debt load. Ms. Baroffio noted the bond payment for the Union Brook Road Reconstruction project will increase from \$44,120 in FY 2021/2022 to \$119,720 in FY 2022/2023. This is how the bond repayment agreement was structured.

Chair Maxwell noted the next budget meeting will be held remotely on Thursday, December 17, 2020. There will be a discussion of proposed budgets for Support Services, the Conservation Commission, the Recreation Committee, and the Energy Committee.

IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Unscheduled). There was none.

V. ADJOURNMENT. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Goodrich, to adjourn. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board adjourned at 7:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

An audio recording of this meeting is available in the Town Manager's Office.

These minutes were approved at the regular Select Board meeting of January 12, 2021.